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SUBJECT: POLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF EAST SUDAN: VISIT TO
KASSALA

Classified By: P/E CHIEF E. WHITAKER, REASON: SECTION 1.4 (B) AND (D)

11. (C) Summary: From April 11-13, Poloff and AF/SPG DeskOff met with government officials, opposition parties, tribal leaders, NGOs, and UNMIS to discuss the political and humanitarian situation in Eastern Sudan. This is the first of two cables to discuss the political and tribal dimensions of Eastern Sudan. Politically, the Government continues to deny the seriousness of conditions in the East; however, its heavy-handed approach to the opposition and NGOs demonstrates that it is indeed worried. Militarily, questions arose whether the SPLA would remain on course with its scheduled withdrawal from Hamesh Koreib. Most contacts believe that once the SPLA withdrew, there would be conflict between the Eastern Front and Sheik Suleiman BetaiQs militia. Betai, however, expressed his confidence that there would be no violence following the SPLA withdrawal. End Summary.

UNMIS Kassala Views

12. (C) The SRSNG UNMIS representative in Eastern Sudan, Abdel Dayem Mubarak, outlined that the government, despite its rhetoric, recognizes the seriousness of the East situation, as reflected by its heavy-handed approach to the Eastern Front. Over the past month, Mubarak said, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) have substantially increased military intelligence presence, increased the number of military aircraft in Kassala, imported fifty Land Cruisers, and reinforced positions around Hamesh Koreib and in Southern Kassala. Furthermore, he highlighted that the GNU had restricted NGO movement within Kassala. In MubarakQs assessment, the GNU continues to speak with confidence because it has bribed tribal leaders for support and improved relations with Eritrea. Mubarak said that Eritrea has improved relations with Sudan to counter its deteriorating relationship with Ethiopia and to control the Eritrean Democratic Alliance, an opposition group based in Eastern Sudan. To emphasize the broader context of the East, Mubarak quoted Minister of Humanitarian Affairs Kosti Manibi as saying, "the East was politically and strategically important; however, there are active actors outside any control and not bound by the CPA."

SPLM Withdrawal Plans

13. (C) In an April 11 meeting, UN Sector Commander for Kassala Prem Thapa said that the SAF claimed that it was prepared to enter Hamesh Koreib as soon as the SPLM withdraw. Thapa estimated that there were about 168 Popular Defense Forces (PDF/militia) fighters two kilometers outside of Hamesh Koreib. According to Thapa, the SPLA has developed a three-step withdrawal plan: the

SPLM will begin withdrawing between the first and third weeks of April, the second withdrawal will occur in the last week of April through the third week of May, and the final withdrawal will take place during the last week of May through the third week of June. Thapa speculated that there would be some "slippage" in the withdrawal schedule, perhaps due to political factors. Another complicating factor is the recent return of Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) troops to the area (Note: The estimated 333 DUP troops are SAF who are former DUP soldiers for the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) returning from Eritrea after the NDA-GNU signed an agreement in June 2005. End note.)

Courtesy Call on Governor: "We Can Solve the East"

¶4. (C) In a courtesy call on the Governor of Kassala State, Ibrahim Hamid, he stated that "if the international community were not involved, it would be easier for the Eastern Front and the Government to negotiate. The international community should instead focus on development and rehabilitation projects in the East." Furthermore, he added that the Eastern Front does not represent the East, because the East people are more interested in development than in wealth sharing.

NGO Roundtable

¶5. (SBU) Poloff and DeskOff met with international NGOs operating in Kassala, who raised the issue of increasingly restricted access for UN humanitarian agencies despite the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA). The SOFA is a bilateral agreement between the Sudanese government and UNMIS that

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allows access for all UN agencies to provide humanitarian assistance without obstruction or impediments. As a result of the confusion, only UNMIS personnel can move freely in the area; all other UN agencies are required to submit extensive paperwork before traveling. The representatives added that over the past month there had been an increased presence of military intelligence under the guise of the "anti-smuggling police" in the area.

Suleiman Betai: "No Violence Expected in Hamesh Koreib"

¶6. (C) Suleiman Betai, the Hamesh Koreib tribal leader, asserted that there were no Eastern Front troops currently in the town. He denied that his militia was the government-supported Popular Defense Forces (PDF), and instead called them the "youths of Hamesh Koreib." These "youths" respected the CPA, he said; however, when the SPLM failed to withdraw from Hamesh Koreib on January 9, the militia entered the town on January 11. Betai revealed that he had signed a secret agreement with the Beja Congress for its withdrawal from Hamesh Koreib; therefore, he was surprised when the Beja Congress fought against the "youths" on January 11. In his opinion, "the time had arrived for him to provide goods for his people, since the Beja Congress had not provided any goods."

¶7. (SBU) Betai asserted that the youths of the East follow their tribal leaders, not the Eastern Front, asserting that the Eastern Front did not represent the citizens of Hamesh Koreib, since its leaders were not from that area. Betai said confidently that the Beja Congress would not fight for Hamesh Koreib after the SPLA withdrawal. He called for the UN and NGOs to provide for his citizens, and also invited senior USG officials to visit Hamesh Koreib.

Hamesh Koreib Commissioner: "The Beja Congress Should Not be Here"

18. (C) The Commissioner for Hamesh Koreib, Ahmed Betai, younger brother of Sheik Suleiman Betai, said that the leaders of the Eastern Front do not represent Hamesh Koreib. Therefore, they should not occupy that area. He added that there were rumors that after the SPLA withdrew, the Beja Congress would enter Hamesh Koreib with Eritrean assistance. Betai appealed to the international community to urge the Beja Congress and the Governors to solve this impasse peacefully.
STEINFELD